# IN THE LAND OF DEATH

Translated from the French
of
BENJAMIN VALLOTTON

*From a Drawing by Muirhead Bone*

CASSELL AND COMPANY LIMITED
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE
1917

*Price Threepence Net*

IN THE SQUARE AT NOYON. *Frontispiece.*

"The 'Marseillaise' is heard. . . . The President passes along the line of bayonets."
(*Page* 14.)

# IN THE
# LAND OF DEATH

*Translated from the French*

*of*

BENJAMIN VALLOTTON

CASSELL AND COMPANY LIMITED
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE
1917

D 5H3
V 1C

## PREFATORY NOTE

THE author of the moving pages which follow, Monsieur Benjamin Vallotton, is a Swiss novelist of considerable reputation not only in his own country, but also in France. He is not unknown in England, for an English edition of his *Ce qu'en pense Potterat* was issued some time ago under the title of *Potterat and the War* (Heinemann), and was well reviewed in the Press.

He was born at Gryon in 1877. From 1895 until 1899 he studied at the University of Lausanne. In 1900 he took a course at the Sorbonne and in the same year became a teacher at Mulhouse, in Alsace, where he remained until the year 1910. During this time he had many opportunities of observing the effect of German rule in the conquered province, and he returned to Lausanne with a greater love for France and a deeper attachment to the free, democratic institutions of his own country.

In the meantime novels and short sketches had begun to appear from his pen. M. Vallotton was at first particularly successful with sketches of military life. Among his most popular novels may be named: *Portes Entr'ouvertes*, *Propos du Commissaire Potterat* (1904), *Monsieur Potterat se marie* (1905), and *La Famille Profit* (1908), which latter secured him the Prix Jouy of the French Academy and was successfully dramatised in the following

year. In 1915 *Ce qu'en pense Potterat* was published and had a great success.

During the first months of the war M. Vallotton visited the French front and saw something of the wanton destruction carried out by the German Armies in their attempt to crush the spirit of France. He described his impressions in a series of eloquent articles which were published in the *Gazette de Lausanne* and afterwards re-issued in book form under the title of *A travers la France en Guerre*. The present volume is a continuation of these impressions, which originally appeared in the *Gazette de Lausanne* during April and May, 1917.

M. Vallotton is a citizen of a neutral State, but that he completely realises the absolute impossibility, at least for anyone who has seen what he describes, of any sort of moral neutrality, is proved by the following passage which we may extract from the work *A travers la France en Guerre* :—

> "If there exists anywhere a certain conception of neutrality which exacts that we shall keep silence after having day after day contemplated a country ruthlessly ravaged, after having heard the sobs of those who wept for parents who had been shot, of those at the mercy of brutal drunken soldiers, we entertain for such a neutrality nothing short of contempt.
>
> "As a Swiss I learned to love liberty. It is, therefore, in my character of Swiss that the victory of France and England will fill me with joy. Not to sympathise with those who struggle for right is to prepare the misfortune, the ruin of small nations. Let right triumph and they will live."

# IN THE LAND OF DEATH

## What They are Saying

THE train moves on through the rain and darkness, the only train that we can take since coal became so scarce. The very corridors are full of people. For every five travellers who get out at a station of which a dull voice drones out the name, twenty others fight their way in. One would think it impossible to add to our numbers, yet, with the help of a little good temper, the miracle happens ten times during the night.

And the train moves on with its human freight, halts between stations, starts again, and again comes to a stop. The rain falls ceaselessly, drumming mournfully over our heads.

Suddenly a voice says :

" We're two hours and twenty minutes late."

And an old gentleman answers :

" The day before yesterday it was three hours and forty minutes."

" Bah ! So long as we get there ! After all it's better than in the trenches."

These words meet with the approval of the company, and three soldiers, who have been sleeping with their kit-bags on their knees, wake up. One

of them is a tremendous fellow with a rather dazed expression. Another is a reservist with delicately-formed features. The third is an inimitable colonial, with narrow forehead, pointed nose, mouth made for chaffing, and black heavily-drooping moustache, which lends a comical air of melancholy to his sly physiognomy.

"Going back?" the reservist asks the colonial.

"Yes. And you two?"

"No. They've done with us for the present. We're being patched up again and are going to another hospital."

"What did you get?"

The giant takes off his cap. In it there are two neat, round holes.

The colonial's eyes grow big. "You mean that you've had a bullet through your skull?" he cries.

"Sure enough," says the other.

"And you're not dead?"

"Not I, since I'm here."

"You're not pulling my leg?"

"Feel for yourself."

Like Doubting Thomas, the colonial feels. Then he gives a long whistle and is silent. Suddenly he says:

"You were born lucky."

The old gentleman amiably asks how it happened.

"Ah," he is told, "that sort of thing comes when one is too curious. One evening, in the trenches, I took the fancy to have a look round. I climbed up on the steps and showed the top of my head. Zim! I didn't have long to wait, I can promise you. The fellow opposite had sharp eyes.

It was just like a whack from a club. It seems that I just sat down and said: 'The dirty dog!' So the others tell me. They took me to the field hospital, they shaved my head, they trepanned me, as they call it—and there I was!"

"And you are quite well again?" asks the old gentleman kindly.

"That depends. Sometimes my head aches fit to split; at other times, when I'm walking, everything suddenly goes round and round. Then there's only one thing to do—lie down flat on your stomach. And quickly too. Then it goes off again. Well, well! It's no good worrying! Besides, a bullet through the skull—that's not a thing that happens to every one. But it's a family failing. My brother now, it happened to him too—in Champagne. Only he died of it, he did."

As for the reservist, he has done his twenty-nine months at the front without a scratch, right up to the capture of the Côte du Poivre, in December, 1916, by the Passaga Division.

"We left the trenches," he tells us, "and ran forward, shouting. All went well. The Boches were so stunned by the bombardment that there was nothing to be seen but hands in the air. We gathered eleven thousand like ripe plums. Yes, everything was over and done with and we were already laughing and joking, when I got a bullet in the elbow. For the moment I felt nothing at all, only a little prick. 'Now then,' said I, 'none of your nonsense.' Ten minutes later I was in such pain as I had never thought there could be. My arm was like your thigh, saving your presence. And

the pain was running through my back and stabbing me in the head as if I'd had the back of it smashed. They picked me up and I came to the field hospital with a man who had only one leg left him. He was dead. 'Poor lad,' said the major to him, 'you've done badly for yourself.' In the hospital they sewed me up and hunted for the muscles with pincers. And they made out that I could move my hand again. 'Not, perhaps, so as to become a pianist,' as the major told me, 'but well enough to stick a finger in your eye.'"

When it came to the colonial's turn he modestly excused himself.

"Oh, I've nothing at all—nothing to speak of. A ball in the biceps. That's a thing to stick a bit of soft bread on and think no more about. And then—just three toes frozen on my left foot. They cut them off for me. If I was a fiddler that might be troublesome now and then; but for a carpenter—it's nothing. Oh, I can't boast about my wounds. Nothing at all. Nothing!"

For a few moments they talk fighting.

"The rifle's no good any longer."

"That's so. About as useful as a fishing-rod. You roll into a ditch, and there it is—corked up, with earth, if not with mud. Out of fifty rifles, in an attack where one has to cross shell-holes and hide in them, there's not one that will fire after two minutes. Not one, you understand. Why, there are many men who don't even carry the things."

"There's nothing of any use except the bomb and the revolver and the machine-gun. The bomb's

great. One takes as many as one pleases, and then —zim! and boom! Oh, it's a great weapon. The man who knows how to throw it—I mean throw it properly—he can do something worth while."

"As for me," says the reservist thoughtfully, "I have no love for the bayonet. To begin with, when you use it you are face to face with your man. It is a personal affair. Yes, you kill a man. While with a bomb, you throw it from a distance and with luck you do for three or four. And it is as if you hadn't killed anyone."

They cease their talk and go to sleep, all but the Colonial, who is now giving a lady an account of the tour that he made in Switzerland before the war. One thing in particular remains with him—Mont Soleil, near Saint Imier.

"Nothing could be prettier. Mont Blanc, thirty kilometres away, madam; and quite little, like a silver star. And mountains! more mountains than you can think. But one ought to be there in August. At any other time you're chin-deep in the snow. But in August you have the forest, the mountains, the pastures, the cattle. Nothing could be prettier. Nothing."

Exhausted by this poetical excursion the colonial in his turn drowses off, with his head on his kit-bag.

In the silence two women in mourning exchange whispered confidences. One hears:

"Yes! Two sons."

"How long ago?"

"The second, three months. The first in 1914. were twenty-four and twenty years old."

"And I. My husband and a brother."

"It's horrible."

"Yes! it's horrible. Where is there a family that does not grieve for someone?"

They speak still more softly.

In the next compartment some young girls are saying that they are coming home from Lausanne, where their father, an officer, is interned, after being twenty-five months a prisoner. Someone asks:

"I hope you did not find him too much altered?"

"Oh! he was very thin. And he coughs."

"You like Lausanne?"

"It's a pretty, clean place; but it's too hilly."

In another compartment ten children are crowded together, little girls and boys between seven and twelve years old, sent away from the villages of the Somme, through Switzerland. Each has a ticket pinned on to his or her breast, with an address. They are all going to Paris. And they chatter away like sparrows when the sun is coming up; they tickle one another and laugh. From the Somme, by way of Carlsruhe, Schaffhausen, and Geneva, to Paris—what a journey! And they are always saying: "*Gut!*" "*schlecht!*" "*genug!*" and then they burst out laughing. And they treat one another like Germans—Germans four feet high.

"Where's your father?"

"Don't know."

"And your mother?"

"Don't know."

"They took my father away."

"Where to?"

"Don't know. They took him away."

A little rascal, the height of sixpen'orth of coppers, announces:

"We weren't afraid of the Boches. They said to us: 'You Germans.' And we answered them: 'You Frenchmen.'"

"Were you hungry?"

"Now and then."

"Who gave you your food?"

"The Americans. But sometimes the Boches helped themselves."

"Were any of the Germans kind to you?"

"Sometimes."

And the oldest of them explains volubly: "The worst are the Saxons and the Prussians. And all the officers. There are some good fellows among the Bavarians."

"Well, you're happy now?"

"I believe you! We're going to Paris."

The ticket collector appears.

"Ladies and gentlemen, tickets, if you please." To the children he says: "Are you all right, you young ones? Are you being good? That's right! Stick to it."

But the colonial's ticket is not in order, and he must find thirty-five centimes. And although the old gentleman has at once paid what is required, that is not the end of the discussion.

"All the same," the colonial repeats, "it's hard luck. To risk one's skin every day, and for nothing, as you might say, and then to have to pay seven sous. It's in the first class, with the young ladies of the Opera, that we ought to travel."

"My friend," replies the ticket collector gently. "I am fifty years old, and I've been thirty years on the railway. And the other day, for passing over an irregularity in order to do a turn to a soldier like yourself, I got four days' imprisonment. At my age! You must apply to the military authorities. I have my orders."

Unwearied, the colonial repeats: "It's hard luck, all the same. To sell your skin for nothing and then to have to pay seven sous."

"I can't do anything, my friend."

"I beg your pardon. You can at least admit that it's hard luck."

"Surely, surely."

"Then, that's all right."

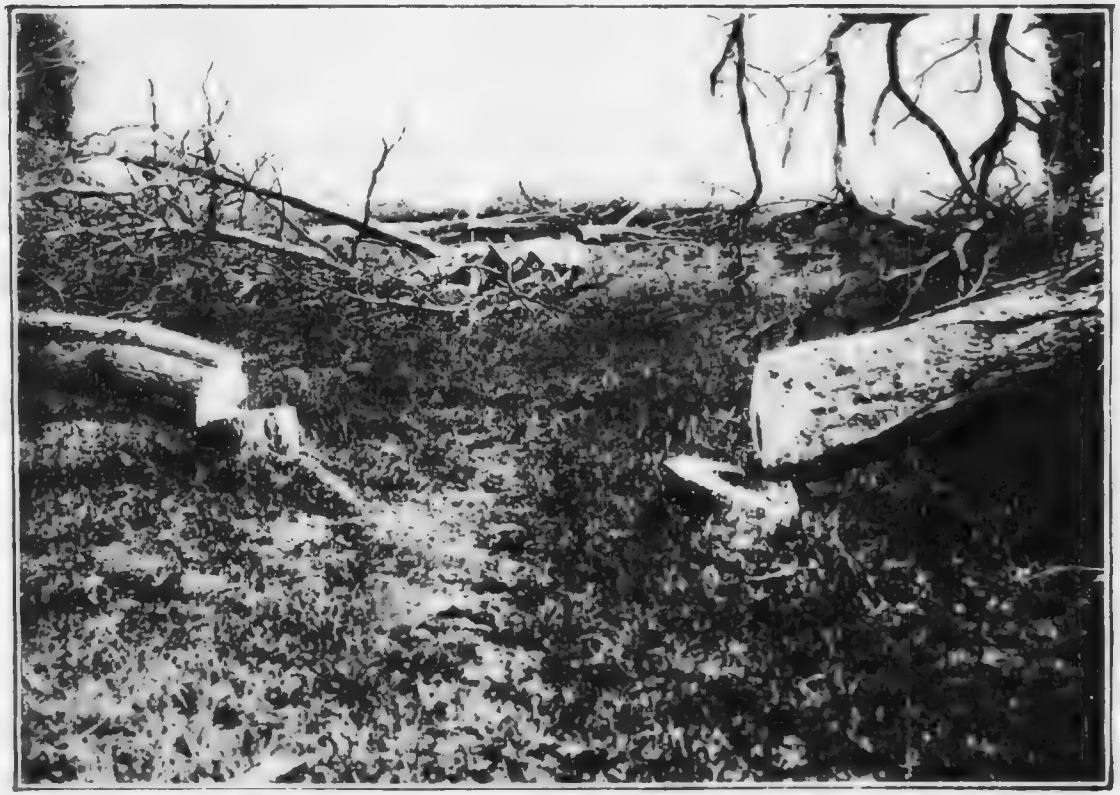
A station. Three hours to wait, for we must let the express go by, and it is still the devil of a way off. We all crowd into a waiting-room, where fifty soldiers are sleeping flat on the floor. Some others, with their hands held out towards a roaring stove, talk together in a low voice

"Seventeen lads, that time, killed by a shell. Seventeen!"

"I saw twenty-one done for at a blow, once, at Verdun. We made a heap of them, to get our food behind them. Those swine went on firing on us all the time. But one must be in peace to eat one's food!"

A railway man crosses the room through the fog of smoke, carrying a dimly-burning lantern. He steps over the soldiers who are asleep on the floor. Out in the night an engine whistles dolefully.

"Oh, dry up!" cries a zouave angrily.



IN THE PARK OF A CHATEAU.

"With a two-handled saw one can make one's way through the toughest trunk."
(Page 16.)

RUINS OF THE CHATEAU OF COUCY

Smothered in [illegible]

[illegible]

"Seventeen at a go. Scattered all around!" repeats the man who sits by the stove.

"And I—I saw twenty-one laid out by a single shell. Twenty-one!" replies the other

Their voices drone through the smoke. Snores rise from the planks. Here and there a head is raised.

"Will that cursed train never come?"

The express thunders past. A blaze of light The earth trembles. The windows shake and jingle in the putty of their frames. We wait on. We yawn.

"Where is God in all this?" sighs an *Alpin*.

The man comes back with his lamp. He calls out something. Then we all get up and seize our baggage. The sleepers tear themselves from the delights of the flooring; they put on their caps and go out on to the platform, staggering with sleep. In the freezing train each of us finds a place and dozes off—the colonial, the reservist, the giant with the perforated cap, the two women in mourning, the eight children with their tickets, together with the white-headed soldiers and the soldiers with beardless chins who are coming back from the place where men are dying. A whistle. Thrusting on into the wet night, the train carries away its burden of glory and wretchedness.

# I.

*April*, 1917.

AT full speed, in the grey of early morning, our motor-car glides through sleeping Paris. Here and there a bourgeois in his night-gown draws aside a curtain, glances at the streaming sky and shakes his head disapprovingly.

We pass through villages and forests—Chantilly, the reflection of whose château is yet invisible in the water of the lakes; Compiègne, where we are shown the spot where a Zeppelin crashed down with its eighteen men, burning like torches; Ribécourt, or rather the ruins which bear that name.

We have passed beyond the old French lines, with their labyrinth of trenches, their dug-outs, their networks of barbed wire, and now we are in the German lines: redoubts, communication trenches and other trenches where are still heaped pieces of furniture that have been taken from the houses. Everywhere are signs *Eingang*, *Kein Ausgang*, *Achtung*, *Lebensgefahr*. And everywhere, too, are pointed stakes, *trous-de-loup*, *chevaux-de-frise*, entanglements of barbed wire so rusty that they show bright red against the frozen ground, while the French wire is of a silver grey.

We go down into a dug-out, several yards below ground. Here we find some hay, a coverlet all in holes, a candle half burned. And we remember with astonishment that men have lived hidden here during thirty months; that in these trenches there

have been dead men, pools of blood; that jokes and laughter have gone up from this place during hours of idleness; that here men have lived during the scorching August days, sweet days of autumn days of snow, days of fog, days of freezing wind, days of warmth when spring has come back, and this during one year, two years, three years.

One night they went away. And already the earth is falling in, and pools of water where rubbish floats are forming. Cartridge cases are sinking into the mud. And it is horribly sad, this ruined soil, where trees that the machine-gun has massacred show their white wounds. Not a living thing; not a sound. It seems as if here Death, more than anywhere, holds her sway. And one may sit in an observation-post, raise one's head clear above the parapet, examine the French trench, hardly sixty metres away. Machine-guns, rifles, and bombs, whose shrill music once filled these solitudes, no longer "react," as one of our guides says. There is nothing now but this grey rain that comes down so quietly, to rust a little more deeply these barbed wires; to knead this mud that is swallowing up everything that man has left behind him; to bring together, little by little, the lips of these wounds that the earth has received. The rain drowns, fills up, levels, abolishes. And the men who will come here a few months hence will not understand. "What!" they will cry scornfully, "is this all?"

Ribécourt once passed, we enter the territory that has been won back. Very surely it was not in a good temper that they gave it up. The telegraph-poles are sawn in two, as are the great trees which

once formed a guard of honour all along these old roads of France. At the cross-roads are craters. In the beds of their tranquil streams the tall bridges lie ruined. It is war. Any army in retreat had done the like, though one tree cut down out of four would have served the same purpose of blocking the road.

A little before we reach Noyon, for whole kilometres, the road is destroyed, blown up, and we roll over timber, planks laid side by side, whose ends tremble violently when a convoy passes over them.

Noyon! The place is apparently untouched, and Calvin no doubt would still recognise more than one district of his native town. It is here that the Germans collected the inhabitants of the burned towns and villages, all those at least who were not between fourteen and sixty years old. These, with the exception of the mothers of families, were sent into the interior, being kept back to do forced labour. And so, one day, an endless, pitiful procession of children, old men and old women, carrying scanty bundles, arrived at Noyon, and while from the whole countryside to the farthest horizon there went up the flames of their blazing homes, these old people, packed together in the streets, under the icy rain, shivered with chattering teeth. Their torment lasted several hours. Rejoicing in his good luck, Death, during that day and the days that followed, carried off thirty of these unfortunates.

While this poor herd waited in the rain upon the good pleasure of its masters, the latter finished

he spoliation of the houses of Noyon. They burst open the safe of the Town Hall with a skill worthy of a professional burglar. Furniture, mattresses, silver, linen, agricultural machines, tools—nothing was forgotten by the skilful gangs who pillaged the houses and stables. When all was ready the carts moved off. Soldiers remained behind long enough to insure that the spoil had reached a place of safety; then they too vanished. And the old men and women who still waited for their orders did not dare to believe in this liberty which they had bought at the price of everything that had been theirs.

To-day, already recovered from their fears, the children play and shout in these courtyards. And the old people move about, leaning on their sticks, astonished that no one questions or suspects them.

It is Sunday. If the belfries still had their bells they would be striking ten o'clock. We are expecting the arrival of the President of the Republic. In the town square, opposite an old fountain, a battalion stands behind its band and its flag. The bearing of these men impresses one vividly. In their helmet and cloak of a "horizon blue" that is grey with mud, knapsack on back, they stand motionless but without any stiffness. Since first taking the field they have endured rain, snow, sun, bombs, bullets, shells—nothing can now surprise them any more. They have fought in Belgium, in the Argonne, in Champagne, in the Vosges. To-morrow they will go wherever they are taken, perhaps to meet Death. A cool assurance gleams in their eyes. Individualists, since they are intelligent men, none the less they stand

shoulder to shoulder. And what health! We often think of the Frenchman as small, almost puny. To visit the front is to revise this opinion. Here we see by the dozen magnificent fellows, brawny, strapping, with their chests well out, standing solidly on their feet, in whom the perfect type of soldier is found. To see a French regiment at work in war-time is a glorious exhibition of athletic strength, of self-respect, and of gaiety. And what life burns in their eyes! Ah! splendid, magnificent fellows! When I see you I understand the Miracle of the Marne. To-morrow, what may you not do?

All of a sudden we hear the click of drawn bayonets, the clatter of rifles handled in unison. The bugles sound. The "Marseillaise" is heard. The old men uncover reverently. And one of them, with hunched shoulders, says, with melancholy pride: "These are our men."

The President passes along the line of bayonets. The flag dips. The bugles sound their call more quickly. "*Aux armes, citoyens!*" A simple, touching picture of war. Dominating the scene, stretched across the front of a house, a strip of calico still proclaims: *Wechselstube.* This is the sole visible evidence that the enemy has been here.

The motor-car takes us towards Coucy. Instantly we are stupefied by what we see. Right and left of the road we point over the countryside, speechless, for there are no words to describe what we feel. We were prepared to see hideous things, but we could not imagine this. Here, so to speak, we are in the very middle of the villainy. As far as we can see, we are hurled right against it. It

envelops us, grips us, oppresses us. It is madness. Before this murder of the soil one can only weep.

Everywhere, by the thousand, the fruit trees lie on the ground. Sawn across a yard from the earth, thrown down all in the same direction, they remain attached to their stumps only by a strip of bark. Apple trees, plum trees, cherry trees, all are brothers in this universal slaughter of the orchards. And so it is, right up to the tops of the hills. Here and there we see variations, refinements: a hatchet has bitten to the heart of these trunks; rings stripe them where the bark has been cut away. Some of them even, their bark stripped from where they fall to the very ground, stand, strange white columns in the tender green of the meadows. What matter how it has been done! Not one of these wounded trees will blossom again. And for every tree which will die erect, ninety are already dead, on their knees, their foliage in the furrows.

The woods are almost uninjured. And so it is clear that it is no military object which has been sought, but that the enemy desired simply to grieve the peasants, to sicken them with misery, to terrorise them. And to complete this insane cruelty it has often been the peasants themselves, guarded by armed soldiers, who have been forced to destroy their orchards, tree by tree. Sometimes, again, where a charge of dynamite has been used, an apple tree stands upright on its branches, its trunk in the air. Truly they have done their work well, these soldiers of Kultur!

No, they have not cut the woods down—that would have taken too much time. But often there

is an elm, a lime, an oak, some single giant, which lends character to a township or serves as a landmark to a neighbourhood. With a two-handled saw one can make one's way through the toughest trunk. And there lies the giant prostrate, encircled with his broken crown of branches. Ghastly, hideous sight!

But we must not let ourselves forget the smaller knaveries of this business. There are the gardens, the homely country gardens, dear to grandmothers, cats, and gentlemen of leisure. These have been especially "bled." Rose trees, jessamines, vines, box trees, wall-fruit, ivy, bushes—all are cut down to the roots; while empty bottles, thrown about beside wells that have been filled with dirt, show that the ruffians found their work a thirsty one.

One cannot say precisely how far this idiotic destruction has been carried. Personally we observed it over a district not less than forty kilometres by fifteen. But this, it seems, comes very short of the whole damage. From Lausanne to Nyon, and from Morges to Cossonay—that is no small space of ground. Rare, very rare, are the orchards that have been spared. How are we to explain them? Do we here see the reward of assistance? Or is it due to some officer's care for his own self-respect? Or is it simply an oversight?

Having murdered the land, it is obviously required that the villages should be killed; for crime has its own logic. We visited as many as twenty of these dead hamlets. It was enough. But there are hundreds of them.

A little petrol, some tar scattered in one room of each house, provide a sure means of destruction.

A match thrown down, and in two hours the village is no more than a heap of ruins. This method was made clear by the pieces of blackened wall which alone stand upright.

But there is also the dynamite cartridge; and the mine. These are more efficacious. Whole streets can thus be blown up, to fall in dust upon the fields. In another part of the village we find nothing but a cemetery of stones in which it is hard to recognise the place where a single house once stood. Nothing is here but a heap of indistinguishable rubbish. Guncy, the two Coucies, Trosly-Loire, and as many more villages have been killed in this fashion. Whole roofs have been hurled to a distance of one hundred ls.

## II.

LET us stop a moment at Trosly-Loire. It used to be a pretty little town, of more than a thousand inhabitants, loosely thrown along the bank of a stream, at the foot of low hills. Here and there were farms scattered through the fields; a hamlet or two. To-day this fair spot defies description. It is a heap of stones, beams, shattered furniture, tiles, clothing torn to rags, and the hundred things necessary to domestic life. Not a wall; not a cellar; nothing. Flat rubbish-heaps everywhere. You poke about with your walking-stick. You stoop down. You bring to light a post-card on which is still to be read: "My dear Adèle . . ." Here is a diploma; a certificate of first communion; the statuette of a saint; a cup, quite uninjured, with a design of forget-me-nots. Lying on a broken hurdle is the sign of an inn: "As well here as elsewhere."

Where are the people? The children and the old folk are at Noyon. All the others have been carried off into slavery. One shudders to think of all the moral and physical suffering endured by those who were born and grew up in this town of Trosly-Loire.

We take a climbing road which leads us up on to the heights above these ruins. Here, in a magnificent situation, the German cemetery has been laid out, to last for ever. Walls six feet high, and on each grave—they are in hundreds—heavy stones, on which the name and age of each dead man are

cut, together with a text from the Bible. And this catches one at the heart, for it is always fine to give one's life. One reads the names of Germans and 18 years old, 19, 20, 30, 45, 51. And everywhere one sees: "*Ruhe sanft*" . . . "*Hier ruht in Gott*" . . . "*Dem Auge fern, dem Herzen nah.*" . . . And in the very heart of the place, in the midst of all these German dead, lie a French soldier and a Russian: "Here lies the French soldier ——." . . . "*Hier ruht in Gott Jegor Savonine, Gefangener d. russ. Armee, Gef. Arbeits.*"

A frank admission. Truly we dare not think of this poor Jegor Savonine, born in some Russian village, dragged into captivity, forced to make German trenches, and killed by a French shell at Trosly-Loire, where he now lies!

And one's mind comes back to all these German dead so arrogantly laid in French soil—to this lad of eighteen, this "Landsturmer" of fifty-one, to all these men who rose at the call of their Emperor and made him the gift of their life. One would wish to salute them . . . But all round this cemetery there lie these thousands of prostrate trees, many of which touch with their disconsolate heads the white wall behind which these dead sleep. And this village, flattened to the earth. And these families, savagely torn apart, carried off like cattle; all this happiness destroyed, all these tears of blood that have fallen, and this cry of an old woman: "Never—no, never shall I be able to have a light heart again." And here, a stone's-throw from this cemetery, there is this garden which waited only upon the breath of spring to blossom, whose vines and rose trees now lie low

n the mud. Why insult and defile these dead men? . . "*Hier ruht in Gott.*" . . . Poor souls! We would be glad to bend our heads over your graves and murmur a prayer; but from here we can see the whole devastated valley from side to side, all this other destruction of trees and villages, all this suffering which cries aloud, and which is your work and that of your brothers. And it is too much for us and we pass on, overwhelmed.

By an improvised bridge we cross the stream, where a soldier is fishing with dynamite, pulling the white-bellied fish to the bank with a long pole. And here we must get down, for the road is destroyed. They are fighting in these thick woods, while aloft the shells are screaming.

And why this new crime, more useless than all the others? Once the Emperor William said to a Frenchman: "You have in France a marvel of marvels—the Château of Coucy." Seated on its hill, at the foot of which a village hides, on the edge of vast woods, it soared with its crenellated keep, its towers and its walls, which had defied the centuries, sixty metres into the air. Avenues of huge trees, forming a cross, led up to it, and these trees, this village, this hill, and this tremendous castle presented a spectacle that was unique in the world. Well, these trees, every one of them, have been cut down to the roots; this village dynamite has destroyed, and 20,000 kilograms of explosives have blotted out this keep, these towers, these walls. The hill is smothered in *débris;* the plain is heaped with monstrous pieces of masonry; the earth is covered with a grey dust

When one thinks, seated among these ruins, of so much beauty slain, fury fills one's heart. Herostratus, Attila, so many other Scourges of God outdone! It was the glory and the splendour of France that here they have willed to murder. And it is even more stupid than the rest of their destruction; it is so stupid that one can only weep. How do these trees affect the war? And this keep, these towers? What could be seen from up there, since a thick forest stretches away to the very horizon?

Is it spite? Did they hope to keep this castle for ever? Did the Hohkönigsburg shame, at this distance, the Rhenish hills? Did they wish to stun the blue-clad soldiers by heaping up these ruins beneath their feet? Did they hope to stay our advance by thus showing of what they were capable? Did they mean that our men should die in order to conquer nothing but heaps of stones that the flames had blackened?

Pride, they say, makes mad those whom it has blinded. This hill of rubbish is worse than a lost battle. So long as there are men on earth they will make pilgrimage to this spot. They will utter curses, blasphemies. This monstrous midden will tell its story to all time. The children of those who committed the crime will blush for it. They will be ashamed of the name they bear. From a defeat recovery is possible; but there are infamies which can never die. Who could rejoice to see a great people, that has given so much to mankind, so stupidly bring this all to a standstill, delivering itself over to the sneers and the detestation of the whole

world? In face of this catastrophe, in face of this hill all heaped with stones, which, five days ago, breathed the very spirit of history, how may we hold back the rage from our hearts?

Suddenly an aeroplane emerges from the dark sky. Swift bird of prey, its wings spread wide, it rushes upon the ruins. The air is rent. It is a machine-gun, which, from on high, is firing upon these *débris*. The bird swings round the hill, makes its observations, and all at once flies into the clouds and vanishes.

Books are scattered over the ground. Whence do they come? From the curé's house that has been blown up? Here, torn to pieces, are the sermons of Bossuet, the Verrines, sermons, a novel, a chapter of which begins with these words: "When Jeanne laughed, she showed all her teeth." And here is a Virgil, open at the third book of the Æneid. The poet is speaking of Polyphemus:

> Monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum:
> Trunca manum pinus regit et vestigia firmat.

Let us be off! Still they are fighting in the depths of these woods, where the guns thunder, and then become an indistinct murmur like that of a crowd.

And once more we cross the ruined country, the levelled villages. One has difficulty in breathing. One asks oneself if one is still a man—if one is not the victim of a nightmare. And the scent of death, of smoke, of ruins under which the carcasses of beasts are rotting makes one faint with nausea.

No more of these houses and dead trees if we are to get a fresh hold on life! And we clutch at the life which flows solely along the road. For ten kilometres perhaps, carriages, baggage-waggons, ambulances, motor-omnibuses, carts, all imaginable vehicles, are literally jammed together. And in this terrific stream not one pause, not a dispute, not an obstruction. No one gives orders or shouts. They are used to what they are doing. They know just what is to be done. An arm goes up: they stop. Again rises: they go on. The wheeled kitchens smoke placidly. Perched on the roof of one of these a cook pours carrots and turnips into his boiler, winking and joking, so that a *poilu*, who is positively rolling with laughter on his waggon, shouts to him: "You're the lad! Why, you're just about as screamingly funny as your kitchen."

Another fellow, nose in the air, examines the aeroplanes which glide about the sky. The sight fills him with envy, and he cries: "Our leaders are a dull lot; why don't they stick some wings on our waggons?"

Meanwhile we must roll on through the mud—a liquid mud, like glue—which the gangs of "territorials" forever scrape away and throw into the fields. Here and there a regiment halts and piles arms. The men smoke, standing or lying on the muddy ground. They are so entirely accustomed to it. And they chaff one another or grumble away out loud.

"How long are they going to cart us about like this?"

"When will this folly be over?"

"A rotten trade!"

"Don't *you* worry!"

Their officer has given the order: "Put on your knapsacks."

They jump up and, with a large movement, swing on to their shoulders this knapsack, which is a veritable monument of war—shovel, mess-tin, blanket, boots, canteen, and what beside? They take their rifles and once again the endless blue ribbon winds along through the mud.

And they say:

"One more march . . . Perhaps, next time . . . After that, nothing doing . . ."

If necessary they will say the same thing for months. Each morning when they wake, each evening as they go to bed—if they do go to bed—they will repeat: "A rotten trade!" They will say it again, five minutes before dying like heroes. This regiment, which is returning to billets, crosses another, which is going up to the firing-line. Exchange of compliments.

"Lazy devils! You're going to rest yourselves, eh? And what for?"

"Just wait a bit, my lad, till a bomb stops your mouth."

"Are you afraid of the Boches that you're off home?"

"And you? Is it with that guinea-pig's face that you expect to go to Berlin?"

"*Manon, voici le soleil,*" sings a tremendous voice.

And off they go, bent under their knapsacks their soles clinging to the ground. As far as one can

THE CHÂTEAU OF HAM

[illegible]

IN THE CEMETERY OF CHAMPIEN.

"These graves have been violated. . . . The stones of family tombs . . . have been torn up and smashed. (Page 31)

see it is all a nodding of caps, a bristling of spade-handles, a swinging of coat-skirts. And forever the waggons roll on, the aeroplanes snarl—that snarling of the aeroplanes, patrols of the sky—that trampling of the drove of men.

And everywhere again these dead trees, these disembowelled houses, these cemeteries where these other regiments of crosses stand packed together.

"*Manon, voici le soleil,*" chants the voice once more.

Each man goes to meet his destiny.

## III.

IN Ham, a charming little town, at last we find houses again. Like Noyon, this was a place of refuge where the people of the destroyed villages were collected. But here also the Germans were resolved to make their departure felt: the houses are emptied from cellar to garret. Everything that could not be carried off, like tables and chairs, has been smashed with axes where it stood, or with pickaxes, by gangs of soldiers led by officers. A sort of delirium, a frenzy seized them. Those who saw are still shaken by it. . . . Half an hour before they left four lieutenants ran through the streets, firing their revolvers at the house-fronts and breaking the windows with stones

"Madmen, monsieur," says an old woman again and again.

None the less these old people are willing to do justice to those who have so savagely ruined them. They admit freely that the Germans in no way hindered America's work of provisioning the people, and say that in many cases, on the contrary, they gave it their help. They say that among them was a remarkable number of kindly, benevolent men, who deplored the hardships of war and at times did their utmost to soften them. But the moment they began to talk of their departure all these men, headed by their officers and non-commissioned officers, suddenly became furious madmen. The sound of explosions, the blaze of fires became part of daily life. They egged themselves on

to ruin the very soil. No longer could they come across a single thing that was whole but they must smash it. It was a lunacy which possessed them. In the end of all, after they had pillaged the towns which had been set apart as refuges and broken all the furniture that they did not carry off, and stolen every precious thing from the few churches which had been spared, even to the pipes of the organs (this we proved at Ham), while the soldiers looked on at the villages leaping into the air and the horizon draping itself in red, some of them gave vent to nervous laughter, chuckling in their malicious joy

And the old woman says:

"For two years we were well enough; but in the last month, monsieur, it took them suddenly. Madmen! Madmen! Madmen! Only look!"

And her lean arm points to the ruins with which the whole country is, as it were, sown.

"Is it really true that they have taken away young girls as hostages?" we ask one of our guides.

"Young girls? Better than that. Ask the Mayor, or any civilian, and you will hear an edifying tale."

In fact, since February the Germans have indeed carried off the whole civil population of both sexes, between the ages of fourteen and sixty, the mothers of families and infirm persons only excepted; and this from all places in the territory which they have evacuated. In most cases these unfortunates received but two hours' notice of the decision by which they were overwhelmed. They

were entitled to carry with them thirty kilograms of luggage. And thus a woman might see her husband leave her first. Of her four children one, ten years old, remains to her. Three daughters of fifteen, seventeen, and twenty have been carried away. Where are they? For two months she has had no word of them.

And this woman is here, before us; a big woman, visibly honest; her eyes are filled with tears.

"Yes, monsieur, they took them away from me one morning. I had barely the time to kiss them before they were gone. What do you think they have done with them?"

Come into the next house that is filled with rubbish; here we find the same story, and in the next again, and everywhere. Sometimes it has been said with a sneer: "The girls who have gone were willing enough. A hint suffices." To grasp the true horror of the reality one must be on the spot, one must speak to the people, hear their complaints, read the agony in their eyes. For we are here concerned at once with deportation to forced labour and with the dispersal of families. Here are missing the father and two boys of fourteen and sixteen, carried off on three occasions; here it is the father, a son, and two daughters; the mother and a little girl of eleven have been left. Here only two old people of seventy remain; the two other generations are gone, nine souls in all. Among these ruins of Ham and Noyon there is not one person who is not asking what has become of children or of grandchildren. They have witnessed such scenes of savagery, they have lived through

nights of such horror—while the whole countryside went up in smoke and thunder—that they expected nothing but the worst. And here is an old man, lame and leaning on his stick, who says:

"It is pretty, eh? The farm burned down; my wife dead last year; my boy and two girls carried off by those scoundrels; all my cattle stolen. What do you fancy is to become of me now? To weep is too stupid. And so, what? Visit the ruins? That is even more stupid. Well, what? What then?"

It is a fact that the suffering imposed upon these poor people goes beyond anything that one can imagine. As one of them says: "They have died like flies in autumn." And those who remain move like ghosts through this town which is no longer theirs, dragging about with them the utter desolation of their whole life.

We continue our tour of these ruins. There lies the belfry of Ham prostrate. The famous château where Prince Napoleon was prisoner from 1840 to 1846, and from which he escaped with the connivance of Badinguet, is nothing but a heap of stones lying in its moat. It too boasted its keep and towers; it too can to-day show nothing more than an immense heap of red bricks, vast blocks of stone and cement, so huge that one looks instinctively for the traces of the avalanche which has carried them so far. Of the whole enormous building nothing remains but the shattered wall where is pierced the principal gateway.

The crime of Ham seems just as hateful as that of Coucy, but even more useless, and so more

stupid, were that possible. For the castle of Ham was built upon a level plain. The top of the keep did not rise above the summits of the hills which lie at a few hundred metres' distance. Since their famous method of "according to plan" obliged the Germans to retreat more than twenty-five kilometres from this place, one indeed finds some difficulty in perceiving what strictly military value this edifice, now destroyed, can have had in their eyes. . . . But the memory of a Napoleon was here enshrined. It was a great castle, which could be seen from afar. . . . No other reason was needed for levelling it with the soil.

Once more we are moving at full speed through this slaughtered land. These heaps of stones were once called Emery-Hallen, Libermont, Eschen, Solente, Champien. Here we get out. Another German cemetery—hundreds of close-set graves. Again we read: "*Ruhe sanft*"; again: "*Hier ruht in Gott.*" And here are five-and-twenty Frenchmen and five Germans (*unbekannte Soldaten*) in the one common grave. A statue of Peace six feet high, perched on the wall, once presided over these dead men. Upon its pedestal we read: *Freund und Feind im Tod vereint.* This statue has been torn from its pedestal by the hands of Frenchmen and has been cast down to the foot of the wall, where it now lies, broken into twenty pieces.

"Does that surprise you, messieurs?" says an officer. "You will understand presently. But observe the condition of this cemetery. See these gravestones, these crosses, these crowns. Our men, though they were furious at what they had seen in

this pillaged country, have respected the last sleep of their enemies. It could not be otherwise. But come along; come."

We pass through Champien on foot. Champien—that is to say, a maze of ruins. Over roads inconceivably muddy through heavy rain, we come to the old French cemetery, laid out around the burned church. All that remains of this church is some blackened walls and a few columns which now support nothing. We thought that we had seen the worst. But we were wrong: the worst is here. It is not only ugly, stupid, useless, mad: but here we leave behind the realm of those sentiments which human beings can experience. We recoil before so hideous a bestiality, and we look one another in the eyes to see if the others have seen what we have seen; and when there we discover a sort of terrified embarrassment we become convinced of the reality of what is before us.

Yes—it must be said, however monstrous it be: all these graves have been violated. The stones of family tombs—huge stones weighing hundreds of pounds—have been torn up and smashed. The Germans have gone down into the vaults. They have taken up the slabs on which the coffins lay. These coffins and their bones, the poor relics of the bodies, have been carried off and thrown down no one knows where. These yawning vaults are empty, and now upon these wrecked monuments there is nothing but the names of those who once slept here. Yet here in this vault, while they have carried off the coffins which lay upon the upper slabs, they have left this one which was at the very

bottom. It has been broken open with a pickaxe, and with the bones rubbish has been mixed, fragments of bottles, jam pots. One would be glad to say that these outrages are the work of two or three of those madmen, those ghouls, who are to be found everywhere. But all the graves have been opened, all about the church, in every quarter of the churchyard. The work must have been done by ordered gangs of men, armed with levers and pulleys. One feels that it has been carried out with method and under the command of superiors. . . . The great fir tree which formerly shaded one part of this cemetery, sawn across at the roots and lying at full length on the ground, confirms this impression, makes the thing certain. This can only have been the work—the crime rather—of the commander of the local detachment.

But obviously the whole German army is not to be blackened by one villainy. Yet this profanation of the cemetery at Champien is no isolated event. Others of the kind have been reported. How are we to explain it? The work, no doubt, of brain-sick men, of criminal lunatics. The work too of soldiers who have ceased to be men, who have carried their obedience to the point of abandoning every ordinary sentiment. The order to destroy *everything* was given. Certain commanders have carried it out literally. Everything is—everything. To declare war upon the dead, is it not one other way of hurting those who still live? . . . Things, deeds can, it seems, be logical. To burn, to blow up, to mine the fields, to kill the trees, to live day after day in the midst of smoke and detonations, surrounded by

the glare of fires, the ears filled with the cries of those who are being hunted like cattle along the roads, the shrieks of women from whose arms their children are being torn—such war makes men mad. Arguments? Objections? It is *the order*. It *must* be carried out. The safety of the Empire is at stake. Yes, here is enough to overthrow weak intellects, to lead men into the worst of excesses, the blackest of infamies.

Standing beside these ruined tombs we looked at one another. There were present the Ambassador of a neutral Power, two Italian journalists, a Staff captain, a lieutenant (the author of *Méditations dans la tranchée*), and the writer of these lines. Were we the victims of an hallucination? . . . Alas!

This evening a French soldier said to us:

"It is disgusting. . . . One cannot understand things like that. . . . Dead men are intended to sleep. . . . One does not awaken them. Besides, they cannot answer you."

And another:

"To injure the dead—it is to bring bad luck on your heads. They are done for, these people. And don't you think that such dirty work gives our fellows some courage?"

We stayed a long time in the cemetery of Champien. It was raining buckets, and the water splashed in the bottoms of those gaping vaults. Black clouds, fringed with yellow, raced giddily across the sky. Surrounded by ruins, felled trees, close beside this church with its charred walls, face to face with these violated graves, we seemed to be in the very heart of Hell. It cannot be possible to

live through moments more poignant. . . . In battle you are at work, the heart beats strongly, the nerves are tense, a sort of recklessness carries you along. . . . Here all is Death. . . . And suddenly there appears an old woman in the midst of this desert, searching the rubbish-heaps with her stick. With her sharp nose, her trembling chin, and her shining, half-mad eyes, she seems the restless spirit of this ravaged land.

* * * *

BETWEEN Bapaume and Soissons the Germans have just lost the greatest battle of the war. For centuries to come men will speak of the vandalism of Germany as they speak to-day of the Huns of Attila. Why have the leaders of this valiant army, whose soldiers in so many hundreds of thousands have laid down their lives for that which they believed to be the salvation of their country—why have those leaders dishonoured their men by forcing them to do these odious things? When the victims of all this useless cruelty are gone these ruins will still bear witness against Germany. Upon its hill for evermore the corpse of Coucy Château shall lie. In this plain there will always be the corpses of hundreds of towns and villages. One day there will come to this place the Professor of History who says "that people always exaggerate" and the amiable neutral for whom all the belligerents "are equally his friends." Perhaps then (a little late in the day) they will understand that it was against Humanity

itself that Germany declared war, that the defeat of France and England would have been tantamount to the enslaving of the whole world, that Germany had been poisoned by militarism.

What a pitiful psychology is that of these great leaders of Germany! Once again, by slaying a whole land, by martyrising the souls of men, they thought to stun their adversaries and cast them prostrate at their feet. And, behold! they have made this war a thing inexpiable. They have sown hate and they must reap their harvest. The terrorism which was to give them a quick victory turns now against its originators; it is because of it that they will be beaten down—because of it they have been devoted to the scorn of a world.

Poor Château of Coucy, poor dead hamlets, poor mutilated towns, poor slaughtered trees, poor old women who weep upon the ruins of your homes! —you are the pledges of a brighter future. The outrages and the sufferings which have been dealt out to you have filled the hearts of the soldiers of France and England with the inflexible will to conquer. It is from this land, so savagely devastated, that the certitude of triumph has arisen.

*Printed in Great Britain by* The Field & Queen (Horace Cox) Ltd., *Bream's Buildings, London, E.C. 4.*